

## ***Education About Asia* Interview with John Dower**

**Interviewed by Lynn Parisi**

MIT Professor John Dower has written numerous publications about modern Japanese history and US-Japan relations. Lynn Parisi is the director of the Program for Teaching East Asia at the University of Colorado Boulder.

**Lynn Parisi:** *John, thank you for doing a second interview for Education about Asia. Yours has been a major voice in the discourse on Hiroshima for many years, and we appreciate your contributions to this EAA special section marking the sixtieth anniversary of the atomic bombings.*

*Since the early postwar period, much of American discourse regarding Hiroshima has been framed by the question of whether the bomb was necessary, a discussion revisited in this issue of EAA. Because lessons on the “decision to drop the bomb” are a staple of many American history classrooms, this enduring controversy seems a good place to begin our conversation. Briefly, can you discuss how the dialogue over this question has evolved over time? Why has this question persisted in academic and public debate?*

**John Dower:** Immediately after WWII, it was understandably argued that the bombs were necessary to end the war quickly—that is, without dropping the bombs in August 1945, the United States would have had to invade Japan, at an enormous cost in American lives. Thus the famous phrase: “Thank God for the atomic bomb.” Then, people added to this that the bombs didn’t just save American lives, they saved Japanese lives as well because invasion would have meant enormous losses in Japan.

Soon after the war ended, however, it became clear that these explanations were too simple. It became known, for example, that no invasion had been planned until November 1945, and that was to be a relatively small-scale invasion of Kyushu. The major planned invasion of the Kanto area around Tokyo was slated for March 1946. So the question arose, “Why the big rush to drop the bombs? Were they really necessary?” Around the same time, the US Strategic Bombing Survey released a famous summary report that concluded that Japan was so desperate and low on supplies that it would have had to surrender by November 1945 even without the atomic bombs or an invasion. In other words, Japan was already on the ropes and on the verge of surrender. That was just an opinion, but once again it made people ask questions.

This report also raised the issue of the Soviet Union’s entry into the war [against Japan], which took place between the bombing of Hiroshima on August 6 and Nagasaki on August 9. Most Americans argue that the A-bombs ended the war. Many Japanese scholars and others knowledgeable about decision-making at the time, however, have

long maintained that it was the double shock of the atomic bomb and the Soviet declaration of war that persuaded Japan's leaders to surrender. The United States knew Japan was terrified of communism and the possibility that the Soviet Union would enter the war and possibly occupy at least part of Japan. It was revealed soon after Japan's surrender that the United States had long been urging the Soviet Union to participate in the war against Japan, and that Stalin had promised to do so within three months after the end of the war with Germany. In July 1945, Stalin told President Truman he would be ready by August 15, a week later than the original promise. In fact, spurred by the Hiroshima bomb, the Soviet Union declared war on August 8, exactly three months after Germany's capitulation.

For many people, these various facts made it more difficult to simply say "thank God for the atomic bomb—it saved a half million or a million or whatever huge number of American lives." There was no invasion in the immediate offing. The Japanese were already on the ropes. The Soviet Union was about to declare war, which everyone knew would profoundly shock Japan's leaders. Why, then, was there such a *rush* to drop those incredibly destructive weapons on two densely populated cities?

By the 1960s, as more formerly top-secret US records became declassified, one answer to this question began to emerge. This internal record revealed that many top-level American policymakers deemed it desirable to use the bomb quickly to show Stalin we had it, persuade him to back off in Eastern Europe, and prevent the Soviet Union from extending control over a slice of Asia and possibly even part of Japan. Obviously, this new information complicated the picture, for it indicated that the bomb was not simply dropped on Japan to end WWII in Asia. It also was seen as a deterrent in the emerging Cold War—what Gar Alperovitz, a pioneer researcher in these archives, called "atomic diplomacy."

As scholars dug in to these secret documents, they found other arguments being advanced for using the bombs as well. For example, it was clear that bipartisanship would end and the US would return to politics as usual once the war ended. President Truman was reminded by Secretary of State James Byrnes, a shrewd and seasoned politician (as was Truman), that the top-secret project to develop an atomic bomb had been extremely expensive. If the war ended with nothing to show for this outlay, Truman and the Democrats could expect to be pilloried by Republicans. So here was an additional argument—in this case, a domestic political reason—for incinerating Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

There was more. For example, the once-secret record also includes arguments by high-level scientists that I always find myself thinking of as "idealistic genocide," a ghastly phrase. The new weapon was so awesome, so much more destructive than almost anyone could imagine, this argument went, that we had to show the world how terrible

it was in order to prevent postwar nuclear proliferation. Just think about this. At that moment, policymakers were not even talking about Japan. They were talking about the future—saying we have developed a qualitatively different capability for mass destruction, and to keep this under control in the postwar world, it is necessary to graphically demonstrate just how terrible these weapons are. How? By dropping them on a real target—Japanese cities packed with real people. These were moral men, but the things we do in the name of morality are oftentimes horrendous.

Once the door was opened to questioning the decision to use the bombs, many other disturbing questions arose, about which there is also a wealth of internal documentation. Could the United States have persuaded the Japanese to capitulate by abandoning its demand for “unconditional surrender” and guaranteeing the continued existence of the imperial institution, which it was known Japan’s leaders were adamant about? Why couldn’t the new weapon’s awesome destructiveness have been demonstrated on a military target in Japan? Why was it necessary to drop a second atomic bomb on Nagasaki, before the Japanese even had time to respond to the double blow of Hiroshima plus the Soviet declaration of war? After the war, there were scientists knowledgeable about the events of 1945 in both Japan (like Tarō Takemi) and the United States (such as Victor Weiskopf) who argued that the first bomb may have been necessary, but the second amounted to a war crime. These are all profound questions and issues, but not the sort that the “thank God for the atomic bomb” argument usually has room for.

**Lynn Parisi:** *You’ve provided EAA readers, and our students, with a very useful case study in how historians reconsider a problem over time and in light of new documentation. As we mark the sixtieth anniversary of Hiroshima in a very different world, do you think that the question of whether the bomb was necessary remains an important and useful focus of discussion? Are there other questions that we should be asking to frame the discussion of Hiroshima today?*

**John Dower:** These questions do not go away. One reason is that we live in a world of runaway weapons of mass destruction, and have ever since 1945. Another is that we live in a world in which civilian non-combatants are routinely identified as legitimate targets of war. You can’t talk about such matters without addressing Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Let’s say you, I, or any educator is asked to generalize about “the twentieth century.” We can certainly document progress, but part of that progress was technological and military, with one result being the ability to kill on an unprecedented scale. We can say that the twentieth century was a wonderfully creative century, and certainly there is much to admire. But it was also a century of unspeakable slaughter. And if we ask for “symbolic” or representative examples, the catalog of horrors is fairly predictable: Verdun and the Somme, the Holocaust, the Rape of Nanjing, the bombing of Hiroshima

and Nagasaki, Stalin's mass murders, China's atrocious Cultural Revolution, and many more recent crimes against humanity. Many Americans would add Pearl Harbor, of course, and many would be aghast at finding Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the same list as the Holocaust and the Rape of Nanjing. But we instinctively know that these were horrendous acts of destruction. They killed, after all, close to a quarter-million individuals, the vast majority of them civilians.

If you subscribe to the "thank God for the atomic bomb" argument, it follows that you must applaud everything about "Ground Zero 1945." This was the issue that led to the uproar over the Smithsonian Institution's proposed *Enola Gay* exhibition on the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war in 1995. But then why is the "Ground Zero" all Americans think of when they hear the phrase today—the World Trade Center bombed in the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001—so profoundly shocking? Is there really no connection at all between this tragedy and crime against humanity and the two Ground Zeroes of sixty years ago?

Most Americans would say there isn't. That was war and this was peace; that was retaliation and perhaps even deserved retribution, while 9/11 was unprovoked; those bombings "saved" lives, while the terror-bombing atrocities of our present day take life wantonly. But the moral, philosophical, and even practical questions involved here cannot be dismissed so easily. How do we deal with the deliberate targeting of civilians?

It is fair to say that, since WWII, the bombing of civilians has been widely accepted as natural, legitimate, appropriate, and necessary. It is integral to "total war," essentially a kind of psychological warfare. Germans did this in bombing Europe and Britain; Japan targeted cities in China beginning in 1937. Initially, the United States and the League of Nations condemned this as beyond the pale of civilized conduct. But by the time we got deep into the war, Britain and the United States concluded that it was desirable to target urban centers. In the past five or six years, there has been a growing international literature questioning how we should think about the air war against Germany. How do we face the fact, as historians and moral individuals, that the Allies killed around 600,000 German civilians in attacks that sometimes didn't even have much military rationale beyond psychological impact?

The same question arises concerning US strategy in the war against Japan, well before Hiroshima and Nagasaki were incinerated. "Tactical" bombing of military installations in Japan began in late 1944, but it was not very effective. Thus, in March 1945, the United States made an absolutely basic decision to fire-bomb Tokyo with napalm incendiaries. The first such air raid killed close to 100,000 civilians and destroyed over fifteen square miles of the capital. From that point on, prior to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the United States systematically fire-bombed over sixty Japanese cities. US pilots called

their runs “burn jobs,” and long before 9/11, historians referred to the practice as “terror bombings.” Including Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the total number of Japanese civilians killed in the air raids was probably similar to the estimates for Germany—that is, around half a million or so, though the figures are imprecise.

Did this help win the war? That is unclear. Is it worth raising the issue of targeting civilians in the broadest and deepest moral, legal, religious, and historical terms—in the context, say, of “just war”? In my view, it is imperative that we do so. It might roil the classroom, but that is healthy. That’s what serious education is, after all: Teaching people to ask questions and think for themselves.

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## **Viewing Guide on Perspectives in *White Light/Black Rain***

**Directions:** As you view the documentary, take notes related to American and Japanese perspectives about the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In your notes, make sure to consider the questions below, as well as, the backgrounds for each individual. Refer to the Wikipedia entry if you need clarification on names and ages ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White\\_Light/Black\\_Rain:\\_The\\_Destruction\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Light/Black_Rain:_The_Destruction_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki)).

Questions to consider as you view the documentary:

- What were the interviewee's experiences:
  - ⇒ The morning just before the bombing?
  - ⇒ During the blast?
  - ⇒ With the heat of the explosion?
  - ⇒ In the ensuing fires and/or Black Rain?
  - ⇒ With the effects of radiation exposure?
- How were victims treated in the aftermath?
- What were the consequences personally?
- How does each individual feel about atomic bombings then and now?

Use these questions as you make notes on separate sheets of paper about American and Japanese Perspectives. For each person interviewed, give the person's name and job and make notes on the questions above. Use these headings to organize your notes:

American Perspectives:

Japanese Perspectives:

## **Atomic Bomb Survivor's Testimony Analysis Worksheet**

Read or view a testimony by an atomic bomb survivor, using the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan—Testimonies of *Hibakusha* (Atomic Bombing Survivors) webpage at [http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/un/disarmament/arms/testimony\\_of\\_hibakusha/index.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/un/disarmament/arms/testimony_of_hibakusha/index.html) or *The National Peace Memorial Halls for the Atomic Bomb Victims in Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Global Network* website at [http://www.global-peace.go.jp/en/en\\_index.php](http://www.global-peace.go.jp/en/en_index.php).

Using the questions below, analyze the testimony and assess point of view and perspective. Be prepared to share your survivor's testimony and your analysis with classmates.

Questions to consider as you read or view your survivor's testimony:

- What were the survivor's experiences:
  - ⇒ The morning just before the bombing?
  - ⇒ During the blast?
  - ⇒ With the heat of the explosion?
  - ⇒ In the ensuing fires and/or Black Rain?
  - ⇒ With the effects of radiation exposure?
- How were victims treated in the aftermath?
- What were the consequences personally?
- How does the survivor feel about atomic bombings then and now?